by Joshua Brustein
Monday, December 11, 2006 12:00 AM

Every two weeks the New York City Council holds its "Stated Meeting" to introduce and pass legislation. As a regular feature, Gotham Gazette covers these meetings.

CLEANER, MORE ACCESSIBLE TAXIS

The City Council passed four bills designed to make taxis accessible to disabled riders and less harmful to the environment at its stated meeting on December 6, 2006. Council members who spoke in favor of the bills said their long-term goal is for every single taxi in the city to be environmentally friendly and accessible to the disabled. Today, less than one percent of all the city's taxis are so-called clean air vehicles â€“ either hybrid-electric models, or vehicle that use efficient compressed natural gas as fuel. Only 81 of the more than 13,000 taxis in New York are wheelchair-accesible.

One bill (Intro 352-A) would require the Taxi and Limousine Commission to develop a plan to significantly increase the number of clean air and accessible taxis within six months, and then regularly report to the council on its progress. The commission would also be required to put information on its Web site explaining to taxi owners the economic benefits of clean-air and accessible vehicles.

Another (Intro 158-A) bill would allow owners of clean-air taxis and wheelchair accessible taxis to operate their vehicles for five years. Currently taxi owners must buy a new vehicle every three years. The longer life of clean and accessible taxis will make a big difference in deciding what kind of car taxi owners buy, said David Yassky, the primary sponsor of the bill.

"Ever since the [Environmental Protection Agency] started keeping track, the city has flunked the standard for air quality. There's a lot we need the federal and state government to do. There are things we can do here. One of those things would be to get all the 13,500 taxi cabs on the street to be clean-air vehicles," said Yassky.

The other two laws would require cab owners to clearly identify their clean-air and accessible vehicles as such (Intros 353-A and 354-A , respectively).

City officials have been trying to increase the amount of environmentally and disabled friendly

cabs for the last several years. When New York State decided to sell 900 new taxi medallions in 2003, City Hall passed a law requiring that nine percent of those medallions be designated for clean air cabs, and another nine percent for accessible taxis. The last of these medallions were sold this June, in an auction that included 54 medallions specifically reserved for accessible cabs and another 254 set aside for clean-air vehicles. Last year, the council has also passed a law requiring the Taxi and Limousine Commission to approve the use of certain models of hybrid cars as cabs.

"We're in an ongoing struggle to make the taxicabs more accessible and also environmentally sound," said Councilmember Oliver Koppell. "The goal is to have a 100 percent accessible fleet."

LOBBYING REFORM

The council also passed a law speeding the pace of a lobbying reform plan it passed this May. The plan bans lobbyists from giving gifts to elected officials, changes the campaign finance laws so that campaign contributions from lobbyists will no longer be matched by public funds, and requires random audits to make sure that lobbyists are reporting their activities properly.

As part of the new reporting requirements, lobbyists were required to begin disclosing certain information electronically in June 2007, giving city officials the time to create a system making that possible. The system was completed ahead of schedule. The law passed at the most recent council meeting (Intro 485-A) would require lobbyists to start using it at the beginning of 2007.

BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS

The City Council also passed a bill (Intro 465 â€“ A) that would increase the amount of money allocated for two business improvement districts. The Hub Third Avenue BID in the Bronx would get a $91,000 increase, bringing the city's annual contribution $400,927, and the

North Flatbush Avenue BID would get a $22,000 increase, bringing the city's annual contribution to $115,000.

Every bill passed unanimously, and will become law if signed by the mayor.

The next stated meeting is on December 20, 2006. It is the last meeting of the year. Â